HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE.

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How to Study the Bible.

Being a paper read by the Rev. L. N. Tucker, M.A., Assistant-Minister of St. George's Church, Montreal, at the meeting of the Diocesan Sunday-school Association, 21st May, 1888.

I must ask, at the outset, your indulgent consideration of the paper which I am about to submit to you. My subject is probably the widest that could exercise the pen of a writer. Whole volumes and libraries have been written upon it. Only the presumption of ignorance could hope to treat it adequately in the space of twenty minutes. To treat it adequately, indeed, within any limits would demand higher qualifications than those which I possess. And my personal shortcomings have been aggravated by circumstances. My time has been so fully taken up with other duties that I have had to prepare this by fits and snatches. I must therefore ask your indulgence for what I have left unsaid as well as for what I have said weakly and imperfectly.

DEFINITION.

The Bible, I would define, in general terms, to be the mind and will of God made known to man through the medium of men and in human language. There is therefore a divine and a human element in the Bible. The Divine element must, in its very nature, be perfect. It was communicated to the writer either by direct Revelation in those things which lie beyond human knowledge or by Inspiration or divine enlightenment in those things which are part of human experience. The human element must also, in its nature, be imperfect. The writer's individuality is not effaced by the divine afflatus. The limitations of his mind and knowledge are not removed by a miracle, but are controlled so as not to mar the effect of his message. It follows that the object of the student of the Bible is to discover the mind and will of

God as thus revealed. To this end he must master the outward forms of human language, in which they are enshrined like treasures in earthen vessels. It follows further that a double set of faculties is required—intellectual faculties to master the letter, and spiritual faculties to discern the spirit.

THE SPIRIT.

It is well known to every Bible student that the Bible contains "A letter that killeth and a spirit that giveth life." 2 Cor. III: 6. In other words there is a superficial meaning attaching to the language that is patent to every reader and there is a meaning that lies beneath the surface and that is concealed under the words or that shines through them according to the eyes with which we read them. This spiritual truth is entirely foreign to the understanding of the natural man. For spiritual truth can only be discerned by spiritual faculties; I Cor. II: 14; and spiritual faculties are the gift of God. They are the first-fruits of the Holy Spirit's indwelling and they are imparted either as a new creation or as a revival of powers that lie dormant in our natural state.

And these spiritual faculties are inseparably bound up with our spiritual life. They are keen or dull according as the divine life is vigorous or sickly within us. They grow and develop like other gifts. Habits of prayer and of worship are the air they breathe. "If any of you lack wisdom let him ask of God." James I: 5. Study of the Word of God is the food on which they thrive. "Desire the sincere milk of the Word that ye may grow thereby." 1 Peter II: 2. And obedience to the will of God is the exercise by which they grow strong. "If any man will do His will he shall know of the doctrine. John VII: 17. The Spirit of God who is the inspirer of the Scriptures can alone give us eyes to see and ears to hear in such holy mysteries. His aid must be sought in prayer and His power felt in daily life before the seals of the Book can be broken and its contents exposed to view.

Let me here express my ever deepening conviction that in the Sunday-school as well as in the pulpit the most valuable of all possessions is that of spiritual understanding and the most useful of all gifts is that vouchsafed to Apollos who was "mighty in the Scriptures." Acts XVIII: 24. For to wield aright this sword of the Spirit is to command the highest form of spiritual success; is to wield the *power of God* unto salvation and sanctification, Rom. I: 16; John XVII: 17.

SIMPLICITY.

It is a striking fact that of all books that deal with abstruse subjects the Bible is by far the simplest and the most readable, and of all books whatsoever, not excepting the Fables of Æsop and Robinson Crusoe, the Bible has the most enduring interest. Its charm never fails. It is, *par excellence*, the book of childhood. Its teachings are so simple and elementary that the dullest intellect can understand and remember them. It verifies its own sayings, "He may run that readeth it "Hab II : 2 and the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein." Isaiah XXXV : 8. Its language is the plain speech of every day life. It conveys even the deepest truths of God in the most concrete forms and the most popular idioms. It is in striking contrast with the abstract thought and the scientific language of systematic theology and of the doctors of the Church. Its greatest triumphs, and that means the greatest triumphs of literature, are probably the Parables and the Sermon on the Mount. He who now reads them can heartily re-echo the exclamation of those who once heard them : " Never man spake like this man." John VII : 46. Properly speaking, however, the simplicity of the Bible does not fall within the scope of one who is seeking how to study the Bible.

DIFFICULTY.

For nothing can be farther from the truth than to suppose that any portion of the Bible will yield its treasures to superficial glances and rapid surveys. Its depths are simply unfathomable. No book has engaged one tithe of the minute and profound study that has been bestowed upon it. No book has yielded one tithe of the harvest with which it has rewarded patient labour. And no book begins to compare with it in the horizons of thought which it still spreads out beyond the sweep of the keenest vision, and in the visible depths of truth which it contains beyond the search of the profoundest intellect. If we are to learn how to study the Bible it must be from the starting point, that the Bible will bear as well as repay study ; it must be to make the toil of study profitable and not to dispense with the toil. Every book, every chapter, every verse, every statement, every word, nay, every particle must be weighed and measured ; time and labour and patience, and the utmost concentration of thought must be devoted to it. For in the Oracles of God more than in any other department of study "there is no royal road to learning."

ACCURACY.

Now the first requisite in all serious study is accuracy in details. Hazy views based upon general statements will not suffice. There must be views clearly defined taking shape from a thorough grasp of all the details. And this I take to be the essential feature of scholarship.

Now, in its highest forms, Biblical scholarship implies a thorough knowledge of the original languages in which the Bible was written. The Greek alone will, rigidly speaking, suffice. For the New Testament, which to us is the most important, was written in Greek and the Septuagint or Greek version of the Old Testament has something of the authority of the original Hebrew from the use that is made of it in the New Testament. This may seem to be out of place on the present occasion. It will have served its purpose, however, if it impress the fact upon us that we have the best possible substitute for the original in our Revised Version of the Scriptures. I am not here comparing the Old Bible with the New. To me it is little short of a Divine Providence that essential truth should have suffered so little in the keeping of the Authorized Version. I am only speaking from the standpoint of accuracy, and from that point of view I presume there is no doubt that the aid of the Revised Version is invaluable. It represents, as far as possible, the same word in the original by the same word in the English where the Authorized Version freely uses synonyms. And for synonyms in the original it uses different words in the English where the Authorized Version uses the same word. The gain is incalculable, especially where an argument hinges upon an important word and derives its main force from the repetition of that word. For example, the word *katallage* in Rom. V : 11, is rendered "atonement" while in 2 Cor. V : 18, 19 it is rendered "reconciliation" in the Authorized Version. In the Revised it is "reconciliation" in both places. In Rom. IV *logizomai* occurs eleven times, and it is not too much to say that St. Paul's whole argument turns on the use of that word. The Authorized Version renders it "count" twice, "impute" six times and "reckon" three times. The Revised Version has "reckon" throughout. While I was Principal of the Sabrevois schools and had but little time for the preparation of sermons I used habitually to study my sermons with a concordance and a reference Bible, seeking out all the passages where the same word or expression occurs. It is simply astonishing how varied and comprehensive any truth becomes when studied in that way. The value of the Revised Version is striking in this connexion, where you can rely on finding the same word in the

original represented by the same word in the English. I cannot too strongly recommend the use of the Revised Version. Study no passage of Scripture without it. It will give more correct views in some places and fuller and clearer views everywhere.

At Family Prayers and in my private reading I use a Parallel Bible, reading the Revised column and casting my eye upon the Authorized to note the variations. This practice too I cannot too strongly recommend.

GENERAL VIEWS.

While accuracy in details is essential to profitable study it is not, of itself, sufficient? The Bible should receive general as well as particular study. Too many students dwell on their favourite books and chapters and neglect the rest. And even in their favourite passages they fix their thoughts too much on isolated words and sentences. They seem to think that the division into chapters and verses is inspired as well as the substance. Whereas originally there were neither verses nor chapters. The transitions from one topic to another were marked by no outward sign. It follows that each book should be studied in its general purpose as well as in its particular statements. No verse, no chapter, should be studied apart from its context. And in such cases small words like *and*, *or*, *but*, and *then*, often are all-important. Here again the Revised Version will be a great help. For it not only divides the books into paragraphs; it is also scrupulously accurate in its rendering of the connecting words. The verse may give a striking phase of the truth. The paragraph gives the whole truth in its fulness. It is only when you have mastered the paragraph or the section that you can see the full force and beauty of the separate truths of which it is composed. They will then appear not like individual flowers, detached from their stem and without any background, however beautiful they may be, but like a bed of flowers, beautiful individually and surpassingly beautiful in combination, the glory of the whole garden in which they grow, their own glory enhanced by the sunlight and azure of heaven.

TOPICS.

By a natural transition we pass on to consider what may be called topical study. If we study a subject in one author it is only natural that we should compare it with the same subject in another author. We shall thus find a marvellous oneness of substance with an equally marvellous variety of details. Truth, in

itself, is various. Its different phases come into view in different circumstances and according to the medium of the mind through which it passes. By tracing any given subject through the whole Bible we see, as it were, all round it; we avoid onesided views which are always hurtful and we gradually acquire a knowledge of "the whole counsel of God." Acts XX: 27.

GROUPS.

By another natural transition we pass on to consider the study of groups of subjects which cover vast stretches in the field of Revelation, but which stand upon the same groundwork. The Parables e. g. have a collective as well as an individual meaning. Though diverse in their character and teaching they form a complete retinue of heralds and servants in the court of what they themselves call "the Kingdom of Heaven." The analysis of the Sermon on the Mount will show it to be a masterpiece of arrangement, which few are aware of, as well as an inexhaustible mine of vital truth, which everybody knows. In the consecutive study of the Life of Christ, by a comparison of the Four Gospels each word and work and incident acquires fresh force when time and place are clearly marked and teaches fresh lessons from the special aspect presented by each Evangelist. The study of the Acts of the Apostles, as a whole, reveals the rise and progress of the Christian Church as a human as well as a divine institution, wherein men were taught by experience as well as by the Spirit; wherein they grew in knowledge as well as in grace; wherein human passion and prejudice and weakness and ignorance had free play but were overruled by divine wisdom; wherein the crisis called forth the man; and wherein, under the guidance of the great Architect, each builder or master-builder erected on the foundation his "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble." 1 Cor III: 12. Thus the Bible becomes a living oracle. It takes its place in history as well as in religion. It is the lake toward which all pre-Christian streams of life converge and in which they eventually lose themselves. It is the source from which all post Christian streams of life do flow and continue to be fed. Thus too it bears witness to its own inspiration and carries conviction to the mind that, like Him who is its central, predominating figure, it is, in truth, "a teacher come from God." John III: 2.

PLAIN MEANING.

No better rule can be adopted, in a general way, than to give to words and sentences their plain common sense meaning. The Bible, it is true, contains figures of speech. But truth is not to be robbed of its nerve and sinew because it is expressed in a figure of speech. Why not e. g. understand Christ's word to Nicodemus "born of water," John III : 5, of the Sacrament of Baptism? Why not? It is the plain and natural meaning. And all the more that it would then correspond exactly with that other expression of Christ about which there is no ambiguity, "He that believeth and is baptized." Mark XVI : 16.

On the other hand words and figures must not be pressed beyond their legitimate use. A metaphor is not a scientific definition. A Parable does not apply at all points, or, as a great authority says, "does not go on all-fours." In such cases one expression should be modified not nullified by another; one view should be supplemented not supplanted by another. Do we e. g. want to know if the expression. "this is my body; this is my blood," Matth. XXVI : 26, 28, involves transubstantiation? Combine it with the following, "the fruit of the vine," v. 29, "this do in remembrance of me," 1 Cor. XI. 24, 25, "show the Lord's death," v. 26, and the answer is simple. And so together with the rule of plain common sense exposition, there can be no sounder canon of interpretation than to "compare Scripture with Scripture." See 1 Cor. II : 13.

ORIGIN.

Like any other volume the separate books of Scripture should be read in the light of the times and circumstances that gave them birth. That St. Matthew wrote for Jewish readers and with an eye fixed on the Law and the Prophets casts a flood of light upon his whole Gospel. That St. John wrote near the close of the First Century and in the maturity of Christian thought affords a clue to much of the teaching of his Gospel; and all St. Paul's writings are bathed in the light of his own character, of his style of writing, of his modes of thought, and of the circumstances which moved his pen.

HELPS.

So too recourse should be had to every source that can throw any light upon the manners and customs, the social and

moral condition and all the outward and inward circumstances of the time and place in question. Some students think lightly of commentaries. It seems to me that a thoughtful man will read all that can, by any possibility, bear directly or indirectly on the subject. Ancient history and literature and art and government have become invaluable as handmaids of Holy Scripture, and that not only in removing objections which are, not seldom, the offspring of ignorance, but also in assisting to enter into the spirit of the times, to see the full force of idioms and allusions and to seize the full purport and meaning of a passage or a book.

TRAINING.

That however is only outward preparation. There is an inward preparation of still greater value. I mean the general culture that trains the mind to observe, to discern and to reason and that renders it susceptible to the most delicate shades of thought and feeling. Other things being equal a well-trained mind will not only see a great deal more *clearly*, but will also see a great deal *more* than an untutored one. And so a mind expanded by a liberal education, an understanding matured by severe study, a memory made ready and retentive by ample exercise, a taste chastened by familiarity with literary models, perceptions made keen and sure by the critical study of various languages, and even, excuse me if I say it, an imagination illumined and yet subdued by acquaintance with the master-pieces of Romance and Poetry, are so many aids to the comprehension of the almost universal styles of writing that find their place in the Word of God.

TRADITIONS.

Once more, we should not lose sight of what may be called the Traditions of the Elders. We live, as it were, in an atmosphere of Scriptural interpretation. Certain convictions or intuitions, certain modes of thought and speech, a certain bias of mind and principle and even certain forms of sound words and certain practices of good living convey to us *insensibly* the meaning of the Word of God. To this we owe more perhaps than even to our conscious efforts to learn. As churchmen we are probably nearest to the mind and will of God in our theology, because, in our formularies, we are nearest to the practice of the Primitive Church. Our impressions and intuitions and convictions are formed, in early childhood, by those priceless documents known as the Church Catechism, the Apostle's Creed, the Collects, the

Litany, the Communion Office and the Order for Morning and Evening Prayer. Each of those documents comes to us laden with the perfumes of nearly two thousand years of Christian thought and holy living. As if in sealed vessels they contain the odour of the days of implicit faith and of unquestioning obedience, which are, from the very nature of the case, the days of ripe spiritual understanding. It has been my experience a hundred times over that my instinctive impressions of certain difficult words of Christ or passages of Scripture, proved, on closer study, to be absolutely sound when I could trace the impression to some familiar line in the Prayer-Book. And therefore my conviction is strong on this point, that the best commentary and interpreter of Scripture is the Book of Common Prayer.

THE KEY.

Last but not least the key to the whole Bible is the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. "They testify of Me," John V : 39, is the Saviour's own comment. And though we should avoid all fanciful and far-fetched allusions, we are safe in looking for Christ everywhere from Genesis to Revelation—not a dwarfed and distorted figure of Christ, the creation of our own fancy or of our own predilections and prejudices ; not a *mere man*, however wise and perfect and fascinating He may be as an example of life ; not *only God*, however great and glorious and holy He may be but without concern for and sympathy with the petty concerns of men ; but the *God-Man* as He lives and moves, in His own inherent life, in the Gospels and then dies for our sins and rises again for our justification and ascends into Heaven to intercede for us ; and the *Man-God* as He, from His throne on High, by the power of the Holy Spirit, redeems and guides and sanctifies the Church as it lives and moves in the Acts of the Apostles, but never dies, yea, rather is assured of life to the end of the world.

CONCLUSION.

If any of you should think that I have raised too high a standard I pray you to bear in mind that a knowledge of our own unfitness, i. e., the spirit of humility, is not the worst preparation for the study of the Word of God. More especially if it lead us to more earnest prayer for the help of the Spirit and to a more diligent use of all the means of study at our disposal. No standard of preparation can be too high when we realize that we are treating the study of the Word of God, which is designed not only

to make "wise unto salvation," 2 Tim. III : 15, wherein it comes down to the capacity of the ignorant man and of the little child, but also to "enrich in all utterance and in all knowledge," 1 Cor. I : 5, and to raise to "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ," Ephes. IV : 13 ; wherein it far transcends the power of man or angel or any created being to fathom it.